

Senator Richard J. Durbin
Hearing on Improving Voter Registration and Voting Opportunities for Military and Overseas Voters
U.S. Senate Committee on Rules and Administration
January 29, 2014

I would like to thank Chairman Schumer for holding this important hearing. The opportunity to vote is one of the most important rights we have as American citizens. In fact, voting is “the right preservative of all other rights.” Our access to the ballot box is so important that the Constitution has been amended six times to expand and protect the right to vote, more than any other issue. These six Constitutional Amendments—the fifteenth, seventeenth, nineteenth, twenty-third, twenty-fourth, and twenty-sixth—ratified over the course of 100 years underscore our nation’s commitment to ensuring that all adult citizens enjoy free and full access to the ballot.

As chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights, I have held a series of hearings on voting rights. From those hearings, one thing is abundantly clear: protecting the right of every citizen to vote is not a Democratic or Republican value, it is an American value. That’s why it’s so very important to ensure that members of the military, their families, and all American citizens overseas can vote without unnecessary burdens or delays. We should do everything we can to clear any barriers to the ballot faced by the brave Americans who fight for our country and protect our democracy.

The Safeguarding Elections for our Nation’s Troops through Reforms and Improvements (SENTRI) Act is an important step forward in that direction. The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) and the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (MOVE) Act removed some of the most difficult obstacles military and overseas voters faced. The SENTRI Act will build upon that progress and help improve the ability of our soldiers and overseas citizens to participate in elections.

I believe more members of the military would exercise their right to vote if they faced fewer obstacles in doing so. First, the SENTRI Act would require the Department of Defense (DOD) to implement an online system that service members can use to register to vote, update voter registration information, and request absentee ballots. This system would also remind service members who have recently moved to update their registration and mailing address. Notably, this bill would also require DOD to provide voter assistance as a routine part of each service member’s annual training. These concrete steps would simplify the process for members of our Armed Services to vote, regardless of where they are stationed.

Second, the SENTRI Act streamlines the process for requesting absentee ballots. Instead of sending in an official form every time there is an election for a federal office held in a state, this bill would allow a person to send just one form to receive absentee ballots for each of those elections during a general election cycle.

Finally, this bill would strengthen reporting requirements so that the Department of Justice can determine whether military and overseas voters are receiving absentee ballots in a

timely manner. The SENTRI Act would also track the efficacy of DOD voter assistance programs and the new online system for voter assistance via a biennial report following the conclusion of each normal federal election cycle.

I want to thank Senator Cornyn and Chairman Schumer for their work on this bill. I look forward to the discussion today, as we work to ensuring that members of the Armed Forces, their families, and all overseas citizens have simple and straightforward access to the ballot box.